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A Season With the Golden Eagles of Santa Clara Co., Cal.

BY ROLLO H. BECK, BERRYESSA, CAL.

With photographs by the author.

While reading this evening in the September-October CONDOR of the editor's wanderings among the birds, my thoughts instinctively wander back to memories of spring-time, and to happenings that befell me while in quest of the aeries of *Aquila chrysaetos*, familiarly known as the Golden Eagle. As the pocket-worn note-book opens what different scenes are recalled! The first note under 1900 was written in the shade of a tall old pine from which I had just descended with two fresh eggs, while the eagles sat on a fence a mile away across the canyon and enjoyed the magnificent scenery, not knowing of my presence.

Under date of March 8, my second entry, my thot's are turned to a spot miles away. After climbing for hours up a steep mountain side surrounded by fog and wet clothes, the nest is found torn down, but as I slide and scramble down, with regrets for the long climb, back to the wagon, an eagle flies from a nest in a small sycamore in the bottom of the gulch but a few rods away. The hills are so steep, that a careful inspection is made with the aid of glasses at a distance of forty yards and the nest is seen to be lined with fresh leaves and ready for eggs. With high hopes I re-

turned to this nest a week later and found the bird sitting on a limb of a near-by oak contemplating the nest which still contained the fresh lining, but no eggs.

On the 9th of March with an early start my third nest was reached about noon. It was located forty feet up in a small oak, surrounded by a tangle of poison oak and other bushes. Owing to the steepness of the hill a good negative was obtained of the bird on' the nest at a distance of 60 feet, by using the long-focus lens. This picture and set of two eggs but partially recompense me for all the time and trouble necessary to obtain them. Had it been the eagle's picture instead of a Western Horned Owl's, which occupied the nest, the recompense would have been ample! But one gets used to these things after they happen every few days through the season.

At four o'clock that afternoon I sat eating my lunch a quarter of a mile below an eagle's nest built in a white oak on another steep hillside. This nest was 75 yards below the old nest which was situated in a lofty sycamore and visible for miles. While debating whether 'twas worth while to climb up to such an exposed nest, the male bird

PLATE I. NEST AND EGGS OF THE GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*.)



sailed over me and slowly up the hill, over the nest, and on out of sight. I followed with camera, climbers etc., immediately. After maneuvering up and down hill for the best site to plant the camera, the spot was selected. With the sky for a back-ground I determined to have a fine picture of the eagle leaving her nest. Setting the shutter for 1-25 of a second, I threw a rock and shouted at the bird on the nest, and waited expectantly. Though I had been in plain sight looking at her with the glasses while she laid low in the nest watching me, she seemed not to be frightened but stood up in the nest, silhouetted against the sky, shook herself thoroughly and sailed out across the canyon. The bulb was pressed and on developing the plate that evening no eagle was to be seen. This was disappointing after such an excellent chance, but we live and learn.

On the 12th of March a visit was made to a nest built last year in which one egg was hatched. As I was reasonably sure of a set of eggs, and as the nest was but a mile or so from the wagon road, the start was made with both cameras, a 4x5 'Midget' and a 5x7 'Premo'. I had had made especially for this event two iron braces to nail onto the limbs, with a slot for the camera screw, and had intended to take a picture of myself up the tree taking a picture of a set of eagle's eggs *in situ*. This would undoubtedly have been interesting but here again my plans balked. One of the camera screws had been left at home in the pocket of an old pair of pants.

Therefore but one camera could be used at a time. The result of the picture is seen in Plate I. About an hour was spent in the tree climbing up and down to pull aside limbs and twigs that obscured a full view of the eggs. Then it was necessary to take the camera down and climb back after the eggs. As it was only one o'clock I hied me over the hills and far away to another pair of birds which had caused me much

hard climbing in a rough canyon to find their nest. Two years ago as I lay resting, after losing sight of two pairs of birds, the female suddenly swooped by me up to her nest. Search as I would no nest was found. Last year one day about noon found me on the ridge high above an eagle slowly circling about. As the view was perfectly open I watched him and soon saw below him the female flying up the canyon from around a little point.

This confirmed my suspicions and a long, close search revealed finally an old dilapidated nest in an oak tree. After looking at it a few minutes, as a forlorn hope I climbed to it and was greatly astonished to find two eagles' eggs. This year I headed for the same nest, but before reaching it located a new nest in a pine tree one-quarter of a mile above it. This contained but one egg, slightly incubated. After gazing at it long and earnestly it was placed in my basket, as the possibility of getting another was not worth the time and hard work of going for it.

Slipping and sliding thro' sage brush, scrubby trees and poison oak the spot was finally selected as the best available from which the picture in plate II was taken. This shows fairly well the nature of the country where most of my nests are found, though it would be shown better were the two small pines not so much to the front. On my return journey a tree containing two nests, from each of which I had taken eggs in former seasons, was passed.

They were both deserted but the birds were seen sailing about their usual haunts. Bright and early the next morning my way led for miles up and down ridges and canyons with cameras loaded with plates and rosy anticipations of two more sets awaiting me. The first nest was reached about 12 o'clock. This was in an old pine 80 feet up, where two birds were hatched last year. That fact, in my estimation, augured favorably for this year. With camera over my shoulder, up I climbed

PLATE II. A DIFFICULT NEST, SHOWING THE RUGGED NATURE OF THE COUNTRY.





PLATE III. TYPICAL NEST OF THE GOLDEN EAGLE IN A PINE.

thirty feet to the first dead limb which contained colonies, large ones, of a black ant. Between the bites of the ants, the camera would slip around under me and impede my progress. My trip up to that nest and back to *terra firma* would have been immensely interesting to a disinterested observer seated a short distance from the tree. *My sole interest lay in getting down as quickly as ants and camera would let me when I found no eggs in the deserted nest.* After getting a picture of this nest and eating lunch the tramp was resumed and about three o'clock I was standing in a small oak tree looking down into my second nest, at two eggs which were finally collected after a hard climb.

This nest was also in a pine on another one of those steep hillsides which seem to be selected so often by the birds in this locality. Owing to brush, trees and slope of ground it was impossible to obtain a full-length view of any trees holding nests. Plate III shows a typical eagle's nest with typical background in the distance. The set on the 13th was taken from here. Last year one egg was laid and hatched in this nest. Just as I stopped to look at the nest for the last time this year at 50 yards distance, the male flew to it with a squirrel in his claws. He looked at the nest, called several times, looked earnestly across the canyon, and then, happening to turn around and see me, quickly took wing and sailed away.

On the 15th of March I mounted my wheel and started on a 75-mile ride to visit two nests discovered on a hunting trip a month before. Passing through a narrow valley and over a mountain range four pairs of birds were seen, one pair of which I determined to investigate on my return trip, which was done. It was high noon when investigations were commenced. The birds were circling about the usual place, the female having evidently just left the nest. Several inviting-looking gulches with but few trees lured me on around one hill after another. As I'd go over a

ridge and glance back there were the birds watching unconcernedly, a half-mile away. When my desire for the set of eggs had vanished under the hot sun and rough climbing, the wheel was mounted and the birds still circled about in their accustomed haunt. It was decidedly annoying, yet no more so than to climb to a nest the eagle had just left and find no eggs. This had been my luck the day before at the end of a long day's ride. Think of it; 75 miles and return by wheel to look into an old eagle's nest and the composition no different from one that could have been reached in an hour from home! The nest was all ready for eggs which would have been mine had the trip been delayed a week. I trust she hatched and reared her young successfully.

An hour before inspecting this nest another one was visited and yielded its two eggs to my basket. This nest was the kind to dream about,—a regular Taylor-Barlow situation, where you step on to a limb and gaze delightedly at the nest and the treasures contained therein, 35 feet up with limbs plentiful enough to serve as a ladder; what more could one want than to have the small boys of the neighborhood unacquainted with its whereabouts? But this 'long-felt-want' of Sargent and other places is not felt here. Quite the contrary. Soon after collecting the set I passed one of the small boys on his way home from school and tackled him on the subject of eagles' nests. He had passed it a week before going up the ridge and had "seen the hen on the nest"! An incident of this character reconciles us to many of the shortcomings and disappointments we meet with so often, and keeps alive the spirit that draws us to the hills and to the mountains as each succeeding March comes round.



Fred M. Dille, the well-known Denver ornithologist, has removed to Altona, Boulder Co., Colo., which we trust will prove an inviting collecting field.